**Ficciones -- Ian and Tábata**

**Introduction**

In the *National Review*, Peter Witonski affirmed that “Borges's grasp of world literature is one of the fundamental elements of his art.” With Spanish and English backgrounds, born and raised in Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges completed his studies and lived for many years in Europe. His readings ranged from Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe to Walt Whitman, Franz Kafka and Hermann Hesse. His unique style and the worlds created by his works have led critics to coin the term “Borgesian,” with his literary influence ranging from Latin American poetry and Argentinian cinema to contemporary writings. "Ficciones" presents us with some of his most renowned stories as well as with many different worlds and philosophical possibilities.

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**The Author: Jorge Luis Borges**

**Life**

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and raised in the neighborhood of Palermo. Brought up in a literary household and having an English ancestry, Borges was used to reading European and American literatures since very young ages. ("Jorge Luis Borges") Both his father and his grandmother, with whom he spoke in English, always encouraged him to read and write. Because of that, he wrote his first story when he was only seven years old, having his Spanish translation of Oscar Wilde’s "The Happy Prince" published in a Buenos Aires newspaper when he was nine. ("Ultraism") As said by Borges: “From the time I was a boy, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted… I was expected to be a writer.” (The Poetry Foundation)

In 1914, Borges moved with his family to Switzerland in order to treat his father’s eye illness, condition that would later lead Borges to blindness. The outbreak of World War I forced his family to stay temporarily in Switzerland, where Borges started to learn French, Latin and German. It was then that Borges started to read the works of German philosophers and expressionist poets. (The Poetry Foundation)

In 1918, Borges was awarded a baccalauréat from the *Collège de Genève*. Because Argentina was going through much political instability with the outbreak of student protests and demonstrations, he and his family stayed in Europe until 1921, traveling in both Switzerland and Spain. It was during this time that Borges became friends with Ramon Gomez de la Serra and Rafael Cansinos Assens and became a member of the Ultraist movement. (The European Graduate School)
In 1921, Borges and his family returned to Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, he started to publish at the Spanish magazine *Cosmópolis* and, in 1924, founded with other authors the ultraist magazine *Proa*. (Letraherido) In 1923, Borges had published his first poetry book: “Fervor de Buenos Aires.”

The election of Juán Domingo Perón, whose government Borges was openly against, to the presidency in 1946 forced Borges to abandon his job as a librarian. (Letraherido) After the coup d’état of 1955 that puts down the government of Perón, Borges was elected the director of the National Library, position he held for 18 years. In the same year, he becomes a member of the Argentine Academy of Letters. (Letraherido) He becomes worldly renowned when in 1961 he wins the *Prix Formentor*, the International Publishers Prize.

With the development of his eye illness, and after many accidents and surgeries, Borges is forbidden from reading and writing and later becomes completely blind. As a reflection about his condition, he writes about God’s irony of giving him both books and darkness in the “Poemas de los dones:"

*Nadie rebaje a lágrima o reproche
esta declaración de la maestría
de Dios, que con magnífica ironía
me dio a la vez los libros y la noche* (Letraherido)

With the development of a liver cancer, Jorge Luis Borges died in 1986 in Geneva, Switzerland. (The European Graduate School)

**Historical and Literary Context**

Because of his grandmother, Borges could read in English even before he could in Spanish. He grew reading Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells. (The Poetry Foundation)

One of Borges’ most characteristic literary enterprises was to imagine and review unwritten books (The European Graduate School), what was influenced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg published under the name of another author. One great example of this is the fiction “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote.”

In his early life and stay in Switzerland, Borges encountered the works of German philosophers and expressionist poets. Among those was Walt Whitman, whose style greatly influenced Borges’ first poems. (The Poetry Foundation) It was also during his stay in Europe that Borges studied the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, Gustav Meyrink Guillaume Apollinaire, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (The European Graduate School).

Back to Buenos Aires in 1921, Borges took the Ultraist movement, which had originated in Spain, to Argentina. His work then started to involve more existential and phenomenological issues, at what point he was influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. (The European Graduate School)

Later in his life, Borges founded postmodernist literature, a movement promoting detachment from life situations so authors could reflect about the creative process of writing and critical self-examinations. (The Poetry Foundation)

**Ultraist Movement**

*Ultraism* (*Ultraísmo*, in Spanish) was a movement of Spanish and Spanish Latin American poetry that happened after the World War I. The movement was characterized by a departure from traditional forms and contents, inviting writers to innovate in their metric, verse and imagery. (“Ultraism”)

On January 25, 2921, the Spanish magazine *Ultra* had its first publication, disseminating the Ultraist movement. Amongst its writers were Rafael Cansinos-Assens, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Guillermo de Torre and Borges. The movement promoted the use of metaphors, which were believed to be the main element of writing, went against the use of language considered to be useless or unnecessarily complicated, as well as advanced synthetizing two or more ideas into one image. (Letraherido)
Borges' first collection of poems, “Fervor de Buenos Aires,” was greatly influenced by this movement. (The Poetry Foundation)

Main Works

Although the works comprising “Ficciones” were published between 1941 and 1956, almost 20 years into Borges' literary career, they also represent some of his earliest short stories. For the first decade after the publication of his first book in 1923, Borges confined himself to poetry and essays. It was only in 1933 that he broke this trend with the publication of A Universal History of Infamy. Published as a series of short works in the literary magazine Critica, Infamy presented semi-fictionalized stories of real criminals. Although Borges later downplayed this work, believing it to be an unoriginal distortion (preface 1954 edition), Angel Flores, who coined the term “magical realism,” identified Infamy as the beginning of the genre (Flores). In Infamy, we can see the genesis of Borges’ literary fascination with crime and mystery. This fascination can also be seen in several collections of detective stories, published around the same time as Ficciones.

Subsequently to Ficciones, Borges continued to publish in a variety of formats, including short stories, poems, literary criticisms, and even song lyrics and screenplays. He published prolifically until his death in 1986, despite finally losing his vision completely in 1954. A complete bibliography can be found here.

Ficciones

Style and Themes

Perhaps no work is a better example of Borges' literary efficiency than his “Ficciones”, which compresses 17 short stories into the space of a short novel. This focus on brevity is a core part of Borges' literary philosophy; while he was himself born into a middle-class family and extremely widely read, he recognized the enormous time commitment required to become familiar with even just the most famous literary works. Thus he developed a novel approach, as he states in the Prologue to the first half of “Ficciones”:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary.
By creating a commentary on an imagined work, Borges is able to explore vast new worlds in a few pages, focusing only on what he sees as the most interesting details and themes of these worlds without making them appear poorly fleshed out or lazily constructed; this approach is most readily seen in the stories “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” and “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim.” In addition, this commentary structure allows him to explore not only an idea itself, but the effect of the idea on a reader; in other words, by probing the reactions of his imagined commentator to the work, he can analyze the role of literature itself.

Though most of the stories in “Ficciones” do not ascribe to the commentary format, the work overall is characterized by similar short, efficient explorations of several overarching themes. The work is divided into two parts: The Garden of Forking Paths and Artifices, the first of which was published several years before the second was added. Nevertheless, references are shared between them; for instance, the Prologue of Artifices references a character, Herbert Ashe, from the first story in “The Garden of Forking Paths” as if he were a real person.

In “Ficciones,” Borges explores his several themes that he comes back to throughout his works. His fascination with labyrinths and infinities pervades the first book, culminating with the literary labyrinth explored in the last eponymous short story, “The Garden of Forking Paths”. Along the way, Borges explores the connection between labyrinths, infinity, and time; between literature and reality; and between creation and imitation.

Plot Summaries and Analysis

Part One: The Garden offorking Paths

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

This first story introduces the book-within-a-book format Borges is famous for. It first briefly imagines an encyclopedia article that describes the apparently fictitious lost country of Uqbar, where mirrors are considered abominable. In a typical Borgesian twist, this article is only present in certain forgeries of the “Anglo-American Cyclopaedia”, which themselves might be seen as warped mirrors of reality.

Fiction and reality now unsettlingly mixed, the second half of the story introduces us to the far more expansive imagined world of Tlön, a planet created by a secret society of intellectuals through a fictional encyclopedia. Tlön acts as a philosophical playground, where Borges explores different possible formulations of language, mathematics, and metaphysics, and the interaction between the three. Perhaps most disturbingly, the publication of this encyclopedia dramatically influences world events, leading to the teaching of Tlönian language and mathematics in schools. This exploration of the impact of literature on real life is a theme Borges frequently returns to, most explicitly in “The Tale of the Traitor and the Hero.”

The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim

Another book-within-a-book, the titular “Approach to Al-Mu’tasim” follows the journey of a man in “search for a soul through the subtle reflections which this soul has left on others” (40). This search begins—in classic detective style—when the book’s protagonist notes a “tenderness, an exaltation, a silence” in his interlocutor, and senses that this man has been distantly influenced by a soul of greatness, Al-Mu’tasim (40). He gradually tracks down people closer and closer to this individual, until the book ends with him stepping through the door to meet Al-Mu’tasim himself.

The critic through whose eyes we see this book then invites us to ponder whether Al-Mu’tasim actually represents a divine conclusion to the search, or whether beyond him there is another, greater soul, and then another, ad infinitum. This formulation of divinity and morality as an infinite chain of increasing greatness is typical of Borges fascination with infinities.

Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote

This story is written in an elegiac manner, as the author remembers a recently deceased author, the titular Pierre Menard. Menard’s (ironically quixotic) literary quest was to “arrive at Don Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard” (49). Had he succeeded—as the author fantasizes he did—the same text would take on an entirely different meaning. For instance, consider the phrase (53):

...truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.

While according to the narrator, this “enumeration” in Cervantes is a mere “rhetorical eulogy of history,” when written by Menard, “a contemporary of William James,” it becomes the “astounding idea” that history is not “an investigation of reality, but its origin” (53).

Thus Borges demonstrates the importance of context in understanding a written work. In the context of his later story The Library of Babel, this idea will turn out to itself connect to the theme of infinity again—since the library contains all possible books, but each of these books could have been produced in an infinity of contexts.
The original "Don Quijote de la Mancha," by Cervantes.

The Circular Ruins

In this fourth story, Borges employs a more conventional narrative format. A mysterious man in a canoe drifts on a river, arriving at an ancient temple where he falls asleep. His goal is "to dream a man... to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality" (58). He begins by dreaming of a large amphitheatre full of students, returning to this dream night after night; but upon identifying his favorite pupil, he is struck with insomnia, and finds himself unable to envision him anymore. Frustrated, he realizes that he must build up his dream man piece by piece, beginning with the heart, then the other major organs. He then instructs this dream man in the "mysteries of the universe and the cult of fire," then destroys in him all memories of their time together, so that he will think himself a real man as he travels to another temple downstream. In a Borgesian twist, our dreamer discovers at the end that he was himself a dreamt phantom as well. The structure of the story is thus reminiscent of an infinite series of imperfect mirrors, as each phantom creates a new copy of itself.

The Babylon Lottery

In "The Babylon Lottery," Borges charts the evolution of a fictional lottery from the familiar structure—many buy in, a few win all the money—to a more all-encompassing determinant of fate. In the Babylonian system, all free men must buy into the lottery, the outcomes of which "determined every man’s fate until the next cycle" (68). Thus a happy drawing might "motivate his elevation to the council of wizards or his condemnation to the custody of an enemy," while an "adverse drawing might mean mutilation, a varied infamy, death" (68). The Company, "all-powerful and astute," eventually abandons the periodic scheme altogether. Instead, it sets up an infinite series of continuous drawings, in which each drawing leads to new, contingent drawings, each taking an infinitesimal amount of time. We are then invited to consider whether it is possible to know whether there exists a Company at all, "since Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance" (72).

The idea of reality as an infinite series of bifurcating possibilities—reminiscent of the many universes theory in physics—dominates the second half of Part I, appearing in different guises three out of four of the latter stories.

An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain

This story, another critique of fictional works, contains in particular one book which mirrors the structure of the "Babylon Lottery." This fictional book, titled "April March," has 13 chapters, divided into three parts. The first part, composed of a single chapter, "reports the ambiguous dialogue of the certain strangers on a railway platform" (75). Each of the three chapters in the second part then recounts a different "possible eve to the first day" (57), and each of these then bifurcate into three possible eves of the second day. Thus the reader is presented with nine different stories, each of which leads to the same conclusion. This bifurcation into the past inverts the scheme of the lottery, which considered the bifurcation of possible futures: all that is fixed is the present.

It is impossible to read Herbert Quain without feeling that it is somewhat autobiographical in nature. The fictional Quain shares Borges’ fascination with infinities and mirrors, and is catapulted unexpectedly and reluctantly into literary fame at the age of forty.

The Library of Babel

Perhaps Borges’ most famous short story, "The Library of Babel" imagines an infinite library, composed of every possible combination of the 25 orthographic symbols (22 letters, space, period, and comma) that can be fit onto 410 pages, 40 lines each, 80 letters per line, plus the letters on the spine. Some have argued that this means that the library is not truly infinite: however, simple math can give us a feeling for its size. The number of possible books (ignoring the lettering on the spine of each book) in the library is $10^{10^{10^{1/2}}}$, which in context, the number of atoms in the visible universe is at most $10^{82}$. This means that in every atom in the universe there was another universe’s worth of atoms, and then in each of those atoms there was another universe’s worth, then the total number of atoms on the third level would still be less than the number of books in Borges’ library. The residents of the library thus occupy a universe unimaginably larger than our own.
The Garden of Forking Paths

The final (and titular) story of the first part merges a detective story with a metaphysical exploration. Our main character, Yu Tsun, is a German spy stationed in England. He is exposed, and must quickly seek out a contact named Stephen Albert so as to communicate British artillery movements. Upon arriving at Albert's house, the two launch into a discussion of Tsun's ancestor's book, "The Garden of Forking Paths." This book is a literary labyrinth, charting the many bifurcating and coalescing paths that can lead to different pasts and futures; as the characters discuss, it is a sprawling metaphor for the nature of time. Thus the Garden combines the past and future bifurcations from The Babylon Lottery and Herbert Quain into a single unified theory of the present.

Tsun abruptly ends the conversation, however, by shooting his host. It turns out that the British artillery is moving to Albert, and the only way to communicate this fact is to kill someone of the same name.

Part Two: Artifices

Funes, the Memorious

In this first story of part two, the author describes his brief meetings with Ireneo Funes, and what he learned in the one conversation he had with him. Funes, who always had a very good memory, becomes extremely aware of all his perceptions and all his memories after falling from a horse and becoming crippled.

Borges uses Funes and his impressive memory to discuss the ways through which we understand and think the world, the meaning of an instant and the idea of infinity. For example, when Funes talks about his attempts to create "an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, and a usable mental catalogue of all the images of memory" (114), Borges discusses the possibility of infinity that exists even with the act of giving names as well as within our memory. Similarly, he also discusses the meaning of an instant given that everything is in constant change: Funes "was the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerably exact" (114).

The Form of the Sword

Here, the author tells the story of his encounter with the Englishman of La Colorada as well as the story he heard from him. This story follows the common pattern in which Borges first explains to us how he met the person and then tells us something about him or her.

In reply to the question of how he got his scarf, the Englishman of La Colorada tells how he met a man called Moon during his fight for the Irish independence. Moon was a man of words, an avid supporter of communism, and a coward. One day, the Englishman of La Colorada saves Moon and provides him lodge, but after some days, Moon sells his protector to the police. In a rapid turn, we learn that the narrator is actually Moon himself and that this is the origin of his sorrow. This turn allows us to feel sorry for both the offender and offended at the same time.

Theme of the Traitor and Hero

This is one of the shortest stories in "Ficciones," yet one of the richest in content. Borges starts laying out the thought process behind the creation of a plot, choosing a place and a time. The story then develops very quickly, with an ending that goes much beyond a simple sketch.

The story starts with the personage Ryan trying to discover who murdered his great-grandfather many years ago. Perceiving many strange connections between the occurrence of his great-grandfather’s death and literature, he wonders “that history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvelous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable…” (125) After drawing increasingly strange connections, Ryan seems to solve the mystery, by uncovering a plot of which he is part himself. Because his explanation is so unlikely but very believable, we are left uncertain about the soundness of his discovery and led to wonder about the infinite connections one can draw among life events, history and literature.

Death and the Compass

In this detective story, the character Lonrot is trying to decipher a series of related crimes. In the first crime scene, a police officer suggests that probably what was just an accidental crime and that Lonrot should not waste his time investigating it. But Lonrot pursues his instincts and keeps on with his investigation until it is very clear that the crimes are all related. Upon solving the mystery, Lonrot goes to a place where he finds out that the whole plot was drawn to attract him to his death and that the first crime had indeed happened due to chance.

In the conclusion of the story, Borges brings back the idea of the labyrinth, this time deising a "labyrinth which is a single straight line" along which "many philosophers have lost themselves" (141). The nature of this labyrinth speaks about the philosophical endeavor itself.

The Secret Miracle

This is the story of Jaromír Hladík, an author condemned to death during Nazism. Imprisoned before he could finish his main work, the character first struggles with the circumstances of his death and then with the fact that he won’t be able to finish his play. He then asks God for one more year in order for him to complete his work. Seconds before his death, God grants him one year inside an instant of time and he is then able to mentally complete his play.

In this story, Borges touches upon what it meant to be an author as well as once again tells a story inside a story. Most importantly, he discusses the infinity of an infinitesimal of time and the mental possibilities it brings.

Three Versions of Judas
In this story, Borges explores two main topics: the infinite possibility of words as well as the morality of informing. Here, Borges goes over the works of different authors who argued completely different things about the identity of Judas, the last one even arguing that Judas was God himself.

In playing with words and connections, Borges seems to prove the soundness of all arguments explored in the story, regardless of how absurd they might sound at first. In exploring the sin committed by Judas by informing on Jesus, he declares this to be the worst of the sins. It is interesting to note that the morality of informing was also explored in the stories “The Form of the Sword” and “Theme of the Traitor and Hero.”

The End

In this very short story, Borges starts describing the annoyance of a paralyzed man over the “Negro,” who is playing the guitar in the street. He then describes the Negro’s encounter with an old acquaintance and how they walk together to a fight in which the Negro kills the other man, revenging the death of his brother. Even though the story does not say so, it seems that the man had promised to come back and that the Negro had waited seven years for this revenge. Because of that, readers are left to think about the most strange ways through which loyalty and duty are manifested.

The story concludes with the meanings of having one mission in life as well as of having killed someone.

The Secret of the Phoenix

In this also very short story, Borges talks about the Sect of the Phoenix, their secret and ritual. His definitions are broad enough for us to imagine any group of people as belonging to this sect. Because he is giving more information about the sect without telling much about it, readers become increasingly curious.

In defining the sect of the Phoenix and its members, Borges also compares its ritual to the rituals and conversions of other religions, showing that they can be seen just as arbitrary as the ones of the Sect of the Phoenix.

The South

This last story is one of the most complex ones. It tells the story of Dahlmann, a common man who is taken to the sanatorium after an incident involving the “Thousand and One Nights.” In a series of events in which the reader does not know how much is composed by dream and how much is composed by reality, Dahlmann leaves the sanatorium and finally goes on a trip to his ranch. On his way, he stops to eat at a restaurant and is disturbed by other men, one of whom invites him to a knife fight. Upon accepting the challenge, Dahlmann reflects on his situation and concludes he is happier than he always when he was admitted to the sanitarium, possibly choosing death in an unreal world than to live in reality.

In the conclusion of “Ficciones,” Borges offers us with a reflection on how the real and unreal can be many time undiscernible.

Critical Reception

Until 1961, Borges was relatively unknown outside of Latin America. English reviews of his work in this period were largely limited to Hispanic studies departments and targeted surveys of books from abroad. Nevertheless, United States critics were quick to recognize the outstanding and unique style of his writing: though they were undoubtedly helped to this conclusion by the fact that he won the Gran Premio de Honor of the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores, which one critic noted was “recently established and apparently much coveted” (R. T. H.). The same critic notes Borges’ blending of perceived high and low literary forms, jibing that “in Argentina, they write even their detective yarns for the Ph.D’s.” Critics were also quick to notice his huge influence on Argentine writing; a 1954 article in the magazine Hispania entitled “Argentine Literature Today” identified Borges as the undisputed leader of both the Martin Fierro movement in Argentine poetry in the 1920’s, and the “novisima generacion” of fantastical short fictions in the 1930’s (Mead).

In 1961, Borges was thrust into international fame when he received the first Formentor Prize for outstanding literary achievement, which he shared with Samuel Beckett. His broad literary influence is now virtually universally acknowledged, with one 2014 BBC retrospective going so far as to name him the “20th century’s most important writer” (Ciabattari).

Modern Adaptations

Borges’ impact and influence in Latin America ranges from literature and music to cinema and telenovelas. (The Poetry Foundation) At the same time, his works, lectures and interviews are widely cited throughout the world.

Borges’ stories have been adapted to many movies, “Días de odio” being a main example. In the film, director Leopoldo Torre Nilson directed the movie “Días de odio,” which is an adaptation of Borge’s “Emma Zunz.” (Letraherido) Many other adaptations followed this first one. After that, Borges participated in many productions, either as the protagonist or as the writer, in both fiction and documentaries. (Revista Sur)

Borges’ works have inspired many movie directors outside Argentina as well. Inception makes reference to Borges’ story “The Other,” which can be seen when the main character is talking to his old alter ego, for example. (Contreras) Similarly, the movie Memento was inspired by Borges’ “The Circular Ruins” and “The Secret Miracle,” according to director Christopher Nolan. (Contreras) One last example is the movie The Matrix, in which the real world is an illusion, and whose inspiration was drawn from “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius.”

His works have also inspired painting and virtual projects. Brooklyn-based author Johnathan Basile, for example, has created a virtual version of Borges’ library, where visitors can explore the library for themselves.
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Images References

The numbers indicate the order of appearance of the images.


(2) La gloria literaria gracias a los demonios familiares. Diario El Pluebo. 8 May 2015.


